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ABSTRACT

The report resulting from a colloquium of scholars on teacher development and promising educational practice for ethnolinguistically diverse populations is summarized. The group met to discuss the urgent need for teacher preparation to meet the needs of increasingly multilingual school populations. Two major conclusions were reached: that educators no longer concentrate on knowing students as individuals; and that educators do know some things about teaching linguistically diverse populations but are slow to begin to use them in the classroom, preferring to use familiar methods rather than struggle to understand new ones. Additional studies are recommended. (Contains 39 references.) (MSE)

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Southwest Regional Laboratory

4665 Lampson Ave., Los Alamitos, CA 90720

(310) 598-7661

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Researchers Gather To Talk About Teacher Preparation, LEP Students

Educators in the Pacific Southwest feel a sense of urgency about the need to better prepare themselves for multilingual classrooms. The problem is easily stated: Most teachers speak only English; meanwhile, a rapidly growing percentage of their students are limited English proficient (LEP). Unfortunately, easily applied solutions to this growing problem seem hard to identify.

At least that is the perception of staff members at the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL). No strangers to the literature on effective instruction, or the theories behind bilingual education, SWRL staff nevertheless are haunted by what they see going on in classrooms throughout the region.

Walk into a typical elementary school classroom and you'll see the usual organized confusion. But look closer. You're apt to see a half dozen or more students not engaged, either by text or by the teacher's instruction. Look again and it's apparent that these children neither speak nor understand English.

Talk later to the teacher and you hear the same laments: "I was never prepared to teach these students." "There's nowhere I can go for help." "I can teach any kids who want to learn, but they have to be able to speak English."

To a large extent, teachers and their students are meeting as strangers. Not just the adult-child kind of strangers either. They are strangers because their spoken and written languages differ. They are strangers because they lack a common culture. For a growing number of students in the Pacific Southwest, schools are alien places where even a crowded classroom doesn't prevent some children from becoming lost.

The problem must be confronted; solutions must be found. Schools must ensure that all children learn, develop sympathetic and thoughtful relationships with others, and believe that success is within everyone's grasp.

With that conviction, SWRL Senior Scientists William J. Tikunoff and Beatrice A. Ward decided to gather into one room a group of prominent scholars who have studied and written about teacher development and promising educational practices for the ethnolinguistically diverse. Most of the participants came to the session with an original paper on the subjects in hand. For two days they explored the issues, floated solutions in trial balloons, and shot down each other's ideas. They exasperated one another, of course. But from time to time someone would say something smart and you could see the participants rise out of their doldrums, bring their chairs closer to the table, and fight to

break into the ensuing conversation. Generally, though, the good idea wasn't matched by another one quickly enough to sustain the spark of excitement; consequently, the enthusiasm would quickly fade and then disappear.

When they finished, Gary A. Griffin, the group's facilitator, was left with the assignment of mining the nuggets left strewn around the room on flip charts, chalkboards, and his own notepad. The result of his efforts is titled, *Teachers, Students, and Language: Multiple Language Settings* (1994).

The paper is truly Griffin's work. Although his thinking obviously was influenced by the group's deliberations, he avoids producing the typical "he said and then she said" proceedings document. Rather, Griffin's writing builds on his own extensive experience as a researcher and professor of teaching and teacher education. For 30 or more years he's been writing about these topics, and his expertise as well as his perspectives are reflected in his paper. Griffin also is Anglo, male, and a well-paid university professor. To the best of his knowledge, these latter characteristics do not impinge upon his thinking or writing.

Educators No Longer Concentrate On Knowing Students as Individuals

Years ago, wannabe teachers were taught to get to know their students individually. "Start with where the student is" and "Work with students according to what you (the teacher) know about their personal interests and experiences," college students studying to become teachers were told. Drummed into them were such beliefs as "Work from the concrete to the abstract, the personal to the general," and "Connect the school with the students' home environments."

Good advice, suggests Griffin. Unfortunately, in the past several decades, educators have concentrated less on getting to know students as individuals and more on understanding them as representative members of social groups.

"We have categorization systems from which we extrapolate characteristics and apply them, in a kind of intellectual shorthand, to the students we teach," says Griffin. "We talk about 'learning-disabled' and 'gifted' and 'lower socioeconomic status.' "

As far as Griffin is concerned, educators work, often very hard and with good will, to fit students to the labels.

"Too often," he says, "The labels simply do not capture the unique features of individual students and, when that happens, we tend to abandon further attempts to understand 'these children.' "

Griffin believes that unless educators pay serious attention to particular students in all of their complexities, we're probably kidding ourselves that we can do anything to meaningfully connect with students whose language is not English.

"Teachers who value students in unqualified ways, ways that are apart and independent of broad generalizations about ethnicity or social class, are more likely to connect meaningfully with limited English proficient students," Griffin says.

He continues: "If educators can avoid the search for comfort and efficiency, refuse to give in to their addiction to harmony, and bring warmth and laughter and respect into places where young people are, it is possible for us to reinvent our schools and classrooms where we all work together for one another's success, whether or not language and culture are signals of our important and valued differences."

And then he captures a little bit of the mood among the scholars when he writes: "This return to devising more personally challenging ways of knowing our students will be arduous for some and, perhaps, impossible for others." After all, he concedes, educators need to return to a way of thinking about, and enacting, teaching and schooling that has all but disappeared.

We Know a Few Things About How To Teach LEP Students Effectively

Griffin believes a good deal of theory, research, and practical wisdom underscore his belief that we in fact already know a few things about how to teach LEP students effectively.

But Griffin isn't talking about the so-called "effective teaching" research movement of the 70s and 80s. Using those findings as a prescription for practice, he suggests, is ill-advised. For example, the direct-instruction model that emerged from these studies came to define teaching. "But this definition," writes Griffin, "had little to do with such desirable student activities and outcomes as problem solving, hypothesis testing, synthesis of ideas and understandings across a range of school subjects, creativity, and the like. Such teaching has little power to cause students to know and understand concepts."

What worries Griffin is that the residue of this earlier research still influences the ways many teachers are taught to teach and the teaching methods they used once in the classroom.

Although the literature today is full of exhortations for educators to attend more directly to sense and meaning instead of repetition of basic skills, many colleges and

universities, as well as schools, have yet to focus on what we call "higher-order thinking skills."

The focus on basic skills is particularly troublesome for LEP students, says Griffin. Too often their mastery of the basics mires them in incomplete understandings of the nature of the world they share with more fortunate citizens who are prepared for situations that require thoughtfulness, problem solving, hunching, conceptualizing, and the like.

Griffin concedes that the effective-teaching research contains some good lessons. Nevertheless, he advises teachers not to view these studies as dictating practice, but rather as offering suggestions.

On the other hand, Griffin promotes a set of ways of teaching that includes cooperative learning, the project method, inquiry and discovery, and problem solving.

"At the heart of these and similar teaching methods is the assumption that students are social beings, concerned about, and eager to participate in, shaping the course of their lives inside and outside of schools and classrooms," writes Griffin.

Griffin is high on the teacher who engages students with school subjects in an interactive way. Such a teacher, he says, is pairing decisionmaking with what is sometimes called "reflection in action." In other words, the teacher keeps in mind the intentions for learning, the nature and characteristics of the students in the classroom, the history of this group in this school, and the particular issues of concern about each student.

"This several-level kind of teaching, blending as it does subject matter knowledge with context information with expectations for student engagement, is probably the only teaching that will be effective in classrooms characterized by the presence of contrasting student languages," says Griffin.

We've Got a Lot To Learn About How To Ensure Better Teaching of LEPs

Whenever social scientists gather to talk about an issue, you can generally predict they'll end their session by producing a laundry list of additional studies that need to be undertaken before they'll be able to nail truth to the wall. The group that SWRL gathered to discuss teacher development and the education of ethnolinguistically diverse students was no exception.

As Griffin explains, "Teaching, language, culture, school features, and teacher education must all be considered in any attempts to improve the lot of teachers and students who are struggling together in classrooms while struggling alone in their language-bound personal contexts."

Griffin would have the research community examine matters of competence; teacher beliefs, theories, and expectations; school context; student identity; assessment; professional resources for teachers; teacher preparation; teacher roles; and staff development for experienced teachers.

Meanwhile, Griffin and his colleagues reluctantly conclude that at present, when it comes to effective practices for teaching ethnolinguistically diverse students, "few clear lessons for practice are to be found."

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